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House passes relief for vets' care providers

WASHINGTON — Family members of severely wounded Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who forgo jobs and health insurance to provide care for those loved ones would get relief under a bill unanimously passed by the House on Wednesday.

The estimated \$1.7 billion in caregiver benefits over a five-year period was part of comprehensive veterans legislation that would open the door wider for the Veterans Affairs Department to offer assistance to veterans' family members.

"Now is the time to address the emerging needs, as well as those needs that have lingered for years," said Rep. Bob Filner, D-Chula Vista, chairman of the House Committee on Veteran Affairs. "This bill represents an understanding that the sacrifices of our veterans are shared among us all as Americans."

The bill instructs the VA to create a child-care pilot program, offer post-delivery care to female veterans' newborns and work with the Pentagon on a study on veterans' suicide. It also includes expanded funding for programs assisting homeless veterans and those in rural areas.

The total price tag over five years is estimated at \$3.7 billion.

The legislation passed 419-0.

Under this compromise between House and Senate legislators, caregivers of veterans from the more recent wars would be eligible for health benefits and a monthly stipend to be deter-

mined by the VA secretary that would be commensurate with commercial rates for home caregivers.

Provisions are also made for those caregivers to receive training, education and mental health services. Arrangements can be made for supplementary home-care aid for up to 24 hours if the primary caregiver needs to take a break from caring for veterans who wouldn't be able to live at home unassisted otherwise.

Caregivers of veterans from other eras would be eligible for a more limited range of benefits for now, but Congress could vote to cover them with similarly generous assistance within the next two years.

Meanwhile, the VA secretary would be required under the law to report on the possibility of expanding benefits to them within two years.

Assistance for caregivers was widely supported by veterans service groups concerned that veterans were going to institutions because family members couldn't afford to take care of them.

San Diego County organizations that support severely wounded troops and witness their caregivers' struggles are encouraged by the legislation.

"The burden on the family members begins from the time the service member comes back home," said Michael Hire, director of the Camp Pendleton branch of the Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society, a private charity that assists personnel wounded in combat, among others, as they transition into the veterans care system.

"For the spouse or a parent, this legislation would help them not to have to worry about a financial burden," Hire

said. "They can give their veteran the attention they need."

"Some spouses have a loss of income; they face transportation costs. There are numerous things that come up that impact those families. Sometimes they have had to give up employment to assist, or there have been many trips involved to get treatment."

"This legislation is very much going to help caregivers with those financial struggles."

One spouse who would benefit is Michelle Briggs, 35, of Hillsboro, Iowa, who cares for her husband, Robert Briggs, a former member of the Iowa National Guard. He has a brain injury, blindness in one eye and paralysis on one side from a 2005 rocket-grenade attack in Iraq.

She was on Capitol Hill last summer with other caregivers as part of a trip organized by the nonprofit Wounded Warrior Project to gather support for the measure.

"Not just us, it will help so many parents of the injured soldiers get the benefits that they are entitled to," Briggs said Wednesday in a phone interview. "Really, they deserve it because they are the caregivers of the injured."

The House and Senate had passed separate versions of the bill. The one passed Wednesday was the result of a compromise between the two chambers. It now goes back to the Senate.

Staff writer **Gretel C. Kovach** contributed to this report.



Rep. Bob
Filner,
D-Chula Vista